

Peter Gelderloos

Anarchy Works

examples of anarchist ideas in practice



Human Nature

*There are hidden stories all around us,
growing in abandoned villages in the mountains
or vacant lots in the city,
petrifying beneath our feet in the remains
of societies like nothing we've known,
whispering to us that things could be different.
But the politician you know is lying to you,
the manager who hires and fires you,
the landlord who evicts you,
the president of the bank that owns your house,
the professor who grades your papers,
the cop who rolls your street,
the reporter who informs you,
the doctor who medicates you,
the husband who beats you,
the mother who spanks you,
the soldier who kills for you,
and the social worker who fits your past and future into a folder in a filing cabinet
all ask
“WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITHOUT US?
It would be anarchy.”*

* * * * *

*And the daughter who runs away from home,
the bus driver on the picket line,
the veteran who threw back his medal but holds on to his rifle,
the boy saved from suicide by the love of his friends,
the maid who must bow to those who can't even cook for themselves,
the immigrant hiking across a desert to find her family on the other side,
the kid on his way to prison because he burned down a shopping mall they were building over his childhood
dreams,
the neighbor who cleans up the syringes from the vacant lot, hoping someone will turn it into a garden,
the hitchhiker on the open road,
the college dropout who gave up on career and health insurance and sometimes even food so he could write
revolutionary poetry for the world,
maybe all of us can feel it:
our bosses and tormentors are afraid of what they would do without us,
and their threat is a promise —
the best parts of our lives are anarchy already.*

Human Nature

Anarchism challenges the typical Western conception of human nature by envisioning societies built on cooperation, mutual aid, and solidarity between people, rather than competition and survival of the fittest.

Aren't people naturally selfish?

Everybody has a sense of self-interest, and the capability to act in a selfish way at other people's expense. But everyone also has a sense of the needs of those around them, and we are all capable of generous and selfless actions. Human survival depends on generosity. The next time someone tells you a communal, anarchistic society could not work because people are naturally selfish, tell him he should withhold food from his children pending payment, do nothing to help his parents have a dignified retirement, never donate to charities, and never help his neighbors or be kind to strangers unless he receives compensation. Would he be able to lead a fulfilling existence, taking the capitalist philosophy to its logical conclusions? Of course not. Even after hundreds of years of being suppressed, sharing and generosity remain vital to human existence. You don't have to look to radical social movements to find examples of this. The United States may be, on a structural level, the most selfish nation in the world — it is the richest of "developed" countries, but has among the lowest life expectancies because the political culture would sooner let poor people die than give them healthcare and welfare. But even in the US it's easy to find institutional examples of sharing that form an important part of the society. Libraries offer an interconnected network of millions of free books. PTA potlucks and neighborhood barbecues bring people together to share food and enjoy each other's company. What examples of sharing might develop outside the restrictive bounds of state and capital?

Currency-based economies have only existed a few thousand years, and capitalism has only been around a few hundred years. The latter has proven to work quite miserably, leading to the greatest inequalities of wealth, the largest mass starvations, and the worst distribution systems in world history — though hats off, it's produced a lot of wonderful gadgets. It might surprise people to learn how common other types of economies have been in earlier times, and how much they differed from capitalism.

One economy developed over and over by humans on every continent has been the gift economy. In this system, if people have more than they need of anything, they give it away. They don't assign value, they don't count debts. Everything you don't use personally can be given as a gift to someone else, and by giving more gifts you inspire more generosity and strengthen the friendships that keep you swimming in gifts too. Many gift economies lasted for thousands of years, and proved much more effective at enabling all of the participants to meet their needs. Capitalism may have drastically increased productivity, but to what end? On one side of your

typical capitalist city someone is starving to death while on the other side someone is eating caviar.

Western economists and political scientists initially assumed that many of these gift economies were actually barter economies: proto-capitalist exchange systems lacking an efficient currency: “I’ll give you one sheep for twenty loaves of bread.” In general, this is not how these societies described themselves. Later, anthropologists who went to live in such societies and were able to shed their cultural biases showed people in Europe that many of these were indeed gift economies, in which people intentionally kept no tally of who owed what to whom so as to foster a society of generosity and sharing.

What these anthropologists may not have known is that gift economies have never been totally suppressed in the West; in fact they surfaced frequently within rebellious movements. Anarchists in the US today also exemplify the desire for relationships based on generosity and the guarantee that everyone’s needs will be met. In a number of towns and cities, anarchists hold Really Really Free Markets — essentially, flea markets without prices. People bring goods they have made or things they don’t need anymore and give them away for free to passersby or other participants. Or, they share useful skills with one another. In one free market in North Carolina, every month:

two hundred or more people from all walks of life gather at the commons in the center of our town. They bring everything from jewelry to firewood to give away, and take whatever they want. There are booths offering bicycle repair, hairstyling, even tarot readings. People leave with full-size bed frames and old computers; if they don’t have a vehicle to transport them, volunteer drivers are available. No money changes hands, no one haggles over the comparative worth of items or services, nobody is ashamed about being in need. Contrary to government ordinances, no fee is paid for the use of this public space, nor is anyone “in charge.” Sometimes a marching band appears; sometimes a puppetry troupe performs, or people line up to take a swing at a piñata. Games and conversations take place around the periphery, and everyone has a plate of warm food and a bag of free groceries. Banners hang from branches and rafters proclaiming “FOR THE COMMONS, NOT LANDLORDS OR BUREAUCRACY” and “NI JEFES, NI FRONTERAS” and a king-size blanket is spread with radical reading material, but these aren’t essential to the event — this is a social institution, not a demonstration.

Thanks to our monthly ‘Free Markets, everyone in our town has a working reference point for anarchist economics. Life is a little easier for those of us with low or no income, and relationships develop in a space in which social class and financial means are at least temporarily irrelevant.^[2]

The traditional society of the Semai, in Malaya, is based on gift-giving rather than bartering. We could not find any accounts of their society recorded by the Semai themselves, but they explained how it worked to Robert Dentan, a Western anthropologist who lived with them for a time. Dentan writes that the “system by which the Semai distribute food and services is one of the most significant ways in which members of a community are knit together... Semai

economic exchanges are more like Christmas exchanges than like commercial exchanges.^[3] It was considered “punan,” or taboo, for members of Semai society to calculate the value of gifts given or received. Other commonly held rules of etiquette included the duty to share whatever they had that they did not immediately need, and the duty to share with guests and anyone who asked. It was punan not to share or to refuse a request, but also to ask for more than someone could give.

Many other societies have also distributed and exchanged surpluses as gifts. Aside from the social cohesion and joy that is gained from sharing with your community without greedily keeping accounts, a gift economy can also be justified in terms of personal interests. Often, a person cannot consume what they produce all by themselves. The meat from a day’s hunt will go bad before you can eat it all. A tool, like a saw, will lay unused most of the time if it is the property of a single person. It makes more sense to give away most of the meat or share your saw with your neighbors, because you are ensuring that in the future they will give extra food to you and share their tools with you — thus ensuring that you have access to more food and a wider range of tools, and you and your neighbors become richer without having to exploit anybody.

From what we know, however, members of gift economies would probably not justify their actions with arguments of calculated self-interest, but with moral reasoning, explaining sharing as the right thing to do. After all, an economic surplus is the result of a certain way of looking at the world: it is a social choice and not a material certainty. Societies must choose, over time, to work more than they need to, to quantify value, or to only consume the minimum required for their survival and to surrender all the rest of their produce to a common storehouse controlled by a class of leaders. Even if a hunting party or a group of gatherers gets lucky and brings home a huge amount of food, there is no surplus if they consider it normal to share it with everyone else, glut themselves with a big feast, or invite a neighboring community to party until all the food is eaten. It’s certainly more fun that way than measuring out pounds of food and calculating what percentage we earned.

As for loafers, even if people do not calculate the value of gifts and keep a balance sheet, they will notice if someone consistently refuses to share or contribute to the group, violating the customs of the society and the sense of mutual aid. Gradually, such people will damage their relationships, and miss out on some of the nicer benefits of living in a society. It seems that in all known gift economies, even the laziest of people were never refused food — in stark contrast to capitalism — but feeding a few loafers is an insignificant drain on a society’s resources, especially when compared to pampering the voracious elite of our society. And losing this tiny amount of resources is far preferable to losing our compassion and letting people starve to death. In more extreme cases, if members of such a society were more aggressively parasitic, attempting to monopolize resources or force other people to work for them — in other words, acting like capitalists — they could be ostracized and even expelled from the society.

Some stateless societies have chiefs who play ritual roles, often related to giving gifts and spreading resources. In fact, the term “chief” can be deceptive because there have been so many different human societies that have had what the West classifies as “chiefs,” and in each society the role entailed something a little different. In many societies chiefs held no coercive power: their responsibility was to mediate disputes or conduct rituals, and they were expected to be more generous than anyone else. Ultimately they worked harder and had less personal wealth than others. One study found that a common reason for the people to depose or expel a chief was if the chief was not considered generous enough.^[4]

Aren't people naturally competitive?

In Western society, competition is so normalized it's no wonder we consider it the natural mode of human relations. From youth, we're taught that we have to be better than everyone else to be worth anything ourselves. Corporations justify firing workers, depriving them of sustenance and healthcare, so the company can “stay competitive.” Fortunately, it does not have to be this way. Industrial capitalism is only one of thousands of forms of social organization humans have developed, and with any luck it won't be the last. Obviously, humans are capable of competitive behavior, but it's not hard to see how much our society encourages this and suppresses cooperative behavior. Countless societies throughout the world have developed cooperative forms of living that contrast greatly with the norms at work under capitalism. By now, nearly all of these societies have been integrated into the capitalist system through colonialism, slavery, warfare, or habitat destruction, but a number of accounts remain to document the great diversity of societies that have existed.

The Mbuti hunter-gatherers of the Ituri Forest in central Africa have traditionally lived without government. Accounts by ancient historians suggest the forest-dwellers have lived as stateless hunter-gatherers during the time of the Egyptian pharaohs, and according to the Mbuti themselves they have always lived that way. Contrary to common portrayals by outsiders, groups like the Mbuti are not isolated or primordial. In fact they have frequent interactions with the sedentary Bantu peoples surrounding the forest, and they have had plenty of opportunities to see what supposedly advanced societies are like. Going back at least hundreds of years, Mbuti have developed relationships of exchange and gift-giving with neighboring farmers, while retaining their identity as “the children of the forest.”

Today several thousand Mbuti still live in the Ituri Forest and negotiate dynamic relationships with the changing world of the villagers, while fighting to preserve their traditional way of life. Many other Mbuti live in settlements along the new roads. Coltan mining for cell phones is a chief financial incentive for the civil war and the habitat destruction that is ravaging the region and killing hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. The governments of Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda all want to control this billion dollar industry, that produces primarily for the US and

Europe, while miners seeking employment come from all over Africa to set up camp in the region. The deforestation, population boom, and increase in hunting to provide bush meat for the soldiers and miners have depleted local wildlife. Lacking food and competing for territorial control, soldiers and miners have taken to carrying out atrocities, including cannibalism, against the Mbuti. Some Mbuti are currently demanding an international tribunal against cannibalism and other violations.

Europeans travelling through central Africa during their colonization of that continent imposed their own moral framework on the Mbuti. Because they only encountered the Mbuti in the villages of the Bantu farmers surrounding the Ituri forest, they assumed the Mbuti were a primitive servant class. In the 1950s, the Mbuti invited Western anthropologist Colin Turnbull to live with them in the forest. They tolerated his rude and ignorant questions, and took the time to teach him about their culture. The stories he recounts describe a society far outside of what a Western worldview considers possible. Around the time that anthropologists, and subsequently, Western anarchists, began to argue about what the Mbuti “meant” for their respective theories, global economic institutions were elaborating a process of genocide that threatens to destroy the Mbuti as a people. Notwithstanding, various Western writers have already idealized or degraded the Mbuti to produce arguments for or against primitivism, veganism, feminism, and other political agendas.

Therefore, perhaps the most important lesson to take from the story of the Mbuti is not that anarchy — a cooperative, free, and relatively healthy society — is possible, but that free societies are not possible so long as governments try to crush any pocket of independence, corporations fund genocide in order to manufacture cell phones, and supposedly sympathetic people are more interested in writing ethnographies than fighting back.

In Turnbull’s perspective, the Mbuti were resolutely egalitarian, and many of the ways they organized their society reduced competition and promoted cooperation between members. Gathering food was a community affair, and when they hunted often the whole band turned out. One half would beat the bush in the direction of the other half, who waited with nets to snare any animals that had been flushed out. A successful hunt was the result of everyone working together effectively, and the whole community shared in the catch.

Mbuti children were given a high degree of autonomy, and spent much of their days in a wing of the camp that was off-limits to adults. One game they frequently played involved a group of small children climbing up a young tree until their combined weight bent the tree towards the earth. Ideally, the children would let go all at once, and the supple tree would shoot upright. But if one child was not in sync and let go too late, the child would be launched through the trees and given a good scare. Such games teach group harmony over individual performance, and provide an early form of socialization into a culture of voluntary cooperation. The war

games and individualized competition that characterize play in Western society provide a notably different form of socialization.

The Mbuti also discouraged competition or even excessive distinction between genders. They did not use gendered pronouns or familial words — e.g., instead of “son” they say “child,” “sibling” instead of “sister” — except in the case of parents, in which there is a functional difference between one who gives birth or provides milk and one who provides other forms of care. An important ritual game played by adult Mbuti worked to undermine gender competition. As Turnbull describes it, the game began like a tug-of-war match, with the women pulling one end of a long rope or vine and the men pulling the other. But as soon as one side started to win, someone from that team would run to the other side, also symbolically changing their gender and becoming a member of the other group. By the end, the participants collapsed in a heap laughing, all having changed their genders multiple times. Neither side “won,” but that seemed to be the point. Group harmony was restored.

The Mbuti traditionally viewed conflict or “noise” as a common problem and a threat to the harmony of the group. If the disputants could not resolve things on their own or with the help of friends, the entire band would hold an important ritual that often lasted all night long. Everyone gathered together to discuss, and if the problem still could not be solved, the youth, who often played the role of justice-seekers within their society, would sneak into the night and begin rampaging around the camp, blowing a horn that made a sound like an elephant, symbolizing how the problem threatened the existence of the whole band. For a particularly serious dispute that had disrupted the group’s harmony, the youth might give extra expression to their frustration by crashing through camp itself, kicking out fires and knocking down houses. Meanwhile, the adults would sing a two-part harmony, building up a sense of cooperation and togetherness.

The Mbuti also underwent a sort of fission and fusion throughout the year. Often motivated by interpersonal conflicts, the band would break up into smaller, more intimate groups. People had the option to take space from one another rather than being forced by the larger community to suppress their problems. After travelling and living separately for a time, the smaller groups joined together again, once there had been time for conflicts to cool down. Eventually the whole band was reunited, and the process started over. It seems the Mbuti synchronized this social fluctuation with their economic activities, so their period of living together as an entire band coincided with the season in which the specific forms of gathering and hunting require the cooperation of a larger group. The period of small, disparate groups coincided with the time of the year when the foods were in season that were best harvested by small groups spread throughout the whole forest, and the period when the whole band came together corresponded with the season in which hunting and gathering activities were better accomplished by big groups working together.

Unfortunately for us, neither the economic, political, or social structures of Western society are conducive to cooperation. When our jobs and social status depend on outperforming our peers, with the “losers” being fired or ostracized without regard to how it hurts their dignity or their ability to feed themselves, it’s not surprising that competitive behaviors come to outnumber cooperative behaviors. But the ability to live cooperatively is not lost to people who live under the destructive influences of state and capitalism. Social cooperation is not restricted to societies like the Mbuti who inhabit one of the few remaining pockets of autonomy in the world. Living cooperatively is a possibility for all of us right now.

Earlier this decade, in one of the most individualistic and competitive societies in human history, state authority collapsed for a time in one city. Yet in this period of catastrophe, with hundreds of people dying and resources necessary for survival sorely limited, strangers came together to assist one another in a spirit of mutual aid. The city in question is New Orleans, after Hurricane Katrina struck in 2005. Initially, the corporate media spread racist stories of savagery committed by the mostly black survivors, and police and national guard troops performing heroic rescues while fighting off roving bands of looters. It was later admitted that these stories were false. In fact, the vast majority of rescues were carried out not by police and professionals, but by common New Orleans residents, often in defiance of the orders of authorities.^[5] The police, meanwhile, were murdering people who were salvaging drinking water, diapers, and other living supplies from abandoned grocery stores, supplies that would otherwise have been ultimately thrown away because contamination from floodwaters had made them unsalable.

New Orleans is not atypical: everyone can learn cooperative behaviors when they have the need or desire to do so. Sociological studies have found that in nearly all natural disasters, cooperation and solidarity among people increase, and it is common people, not governments, who voluntarily do most of the work carrying out rescues and protecting one another throughout the crisis.^[6]

Haven’t humans always been patriarchal?

One of the most ancient forms of oppression and hierarchy is patriarchy: the division of humans into two rigid gender roles and the domination of men over women. But patriarchy is not natural or universal. Many societies have had more than two gender categories, and have allowed their members to change gender. Some even created respected spiritual roles for those who did not fit into either of the primary genders. The majority of prehistoric art depicts people who are either of no determinate gender or people with ambiguous, exaggerated combinations of masculine and feminine traits. In such societies, gender was fluid. It was something of a historic coup to enforce the notion of two fixed, idealized genders that we now consider natural. Speaking in strictly physical terms, many perfectly healthy people are born intersexed, with male

and female physiological characteristics, showing that these categories exist on a fluid continuum. It makes no sense to make people who do not fit easily into one category feel as though they are unnatural.

Even in our patriarchal society, in which everyone is conditioned to believe that patriarchy is natural, there has always been resistance. Much current resistance by queer people and transgender people takes a horizontal form. One organization in New York City, called FIERCE!, includes a wide spectrum of people excluded and oppressed by patriarchy: transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirit (an honored category in many Native American societies for people who are not identified as strictly men or women), queer, and questioning (people who have not made up their minds about their sexuality or gender identity, or who do not feel comfortable in any category). FIERCE! was founded in 2000, mostly by youth of color, and with anarchist participation. They uphold a horizontal ethic of “organizing by us, for us,” and they actively link resistance to patriarchy, transphobia, and homophobia with resistance to capitalism and racism. Their actions have included protesting police brutality against transgender and queer youth; education through documentary films, zines, and the internet; and organizing for fair healthcare and against gentrification, particularly where the latter threatens to destroy important cultural and social spaces for queer youth.

At the time of this writing they are particularly active in a campaign to stop the gentrification of the Christopher Street Pier, which has been one of the only safe public spaces for homeless and low-income queer youth of color to meet and build community. Since 2001, the city has been trying to develop the Pier, and police harassment and arrests have multiplied. The FIERCE! campaign has helped provide a rallying point for those who want to save the space, and changed the public debate so that other voices are heard besides those of the government and business owners. Our society’s attitudes about gender and sexuality have changed radically in the past centuries, largely because of groups like this taking direct action to create what is said to be impossible.

Resistance to patriarchy goes back as far as we care to look. In the “good old days” when these gender roles were supposedly unchallenged and accepted as natural, we can find stories of utopia, that upset the assumption that patriarchy is natural, and the notion that civilized progress is bringing us steadily from our brutal origins towards more enlightened sensibilities. In fact the idea of total freedom has always played a role in human history.

In the 1600s, Europeans were streaming to North America for a variety of reasons, building new colonies that exhibited a wide range of characteristics. They included plantation economies based on slave labor, penal colonies, trading networks that sought to compel the indigenous inhabitants to produce large quantities of animal skins, and fundamentalist religious utopias based on the total genocide of the native population. But just as the plantation colonies had their slave rebellions, the religious colonies had their heretics. One noteworthy heretic was Anne

Hutchinson. An anabaptist who came to New England to escape religious persecution in the old world, she began to hold women's meetings in her house, discussion groups based on free interpretation of the Bible. As the popularity of these meetings spread, men began to participate as well. Anne won popular support for her well argued ideas, which opposed the slavery of Africans and Native Americans, criticized the church, and insisted that being born a woman was a blessing and not a curse.

The religious leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony put her on trial for blasphemy, but at trial she stood by her ideas. She was heckled and called an instrument of the devil, and one minister said, "You have stepped out of your place, you have rather been a husband than a wife, a preacher than a hearer, and a magistrate than a subject." Upon her expulsion Anne Hutchinson organized a group, in 1637, to form a settlement named Pocasset. They intentionally settled near to where Roger Williams, a progressive theologian, had founded Providence Plantations, a settlement based on the idea of total equality and freedom of conscience for all inhabitants, and friendly relations with the indigenous neighbors. These settlements were to become, respectively, Portsmouth and Providence, Rhode Island. Early on they joined to form the Rhode Island Colony. Both settlements allegedly maintained friendly relations with the neighboring indigenous nation, the Narragansett; Roger Williams' settlement was gifted the land they built on, whereas Hutchinson's group negotiated an exchange to buy land.

Initially, Pocasset was organized through elected councils and the people refused to have a governor. The settlement recognized equality between the sexes and trial by jury; abolished capital punishment, witchtrials, imprisonment for debt, and slavery; and granted total religious freedom. The second synagogue in North America was built in the Rhode Island colony. In 1651 one member of Hutchinson's group seized power and got the government of England to bestow him governorship over the colony, but after two years the other people in the settlement kicked him out in a mini-revolution. After this incident, Anne Hutchinson realized that her religious beliefs opposed "magistracy," or governmental authority, and in her later years she was said to have developed a political-religious philosophy very similar to individualist anarchism. One might say that Hutchinson and her colleagues were ahead of their times, but in every period of history there have been stories of people creating utopias, women asserting their equality, laypeople negating the religious leaders' monopoly on truth.

Outside of Western civilization we can find many examples of non-patriarchal societies. Some stateless societies intentionally preserve gender fluidity, like the Mbuti described previously. Many societies accept fixed genders and division of roles between men and women, but seek to preserve equality between these roles. Several of these societies allow transgender expressions — individuals changing their gender or adopting a unique gender identity. In hunter-gatherer societies "a sharp and hard division of labor between the sexes is not universal... [and in the case

of one particular society] virtually every subsistence activity can be, and often is, performed by either men or women".^[7]

The Igbo of western Africa had separate spheres of activity for men and women. Women were responsible for certain economic tasks and men for others, and each group held power autonomously over their sphere. These spheres designated who produced which goods, domesticated which animals, and took which responsibilities in the garden and market. If a man interfered in the women's sphere of activity or abused his wife, the women had a ritual of collective solidarity that preserved the balance and punished the offender, called "sitting on a man." All the women would assemble outside the man's house, yelling at him and insulting him in order to cause him shame. If he did not come out to apologize the mob of women might destroy the fence around his house and his outlying storage buildings. If his offense were grievous enough, the women might even storm into his house, drag him out, and beat him up. When the British colonized the Igbo, they recognized men's institutions and economic roles, but ignored or were blind to the corresponding women's sphere of social life. When Igbo women responded to British indecency with the traditional practice of "sitting on a man," the British, possibly mistaking it for a women's insurrection, opened fire, putting an end to the gender-balancing ritual and cementing the institution of patriarchy in the society they had colonized.^[8]

The Haudenosaunne, called the Iroquois by Europeans, are a matrilineal egalitarian society of eastern North America. They traditionally use several means to balance gender relations. Whereas European civilization utilizes gender division to socialize people into rigid roles and to oppress women, queer, and transgendered people, the gendered division of labor and social roles among the Haudenosaunne functions to preserve a balance, assigning each group autonomous niches and powers, and allowing a greater degree of movement between genders than is considered possible in Western society. For hundreds of years the Haudenosaunne have coordinated between multiple nations using a federative structure, and at each level of organization there were women's councils and men's councils. At what might be called the national level, which concerned itself with matters of war and peace, the men's council made the decisions, though the women held a veto power. At the local level, women held more influence. The basic socio-economic unit, the longhouse, was considered to belong to the women, and men had no council at this level. When a man married a woman, he moved into her house. Any man who did not behave could ultimately be kicked out of the longhouse by the women.

Western society typically sees the "higher" levels of organization as being more important and powerful — even the language we use reflects this; but because the Haudenosaunne were egalitarian and decentralized, the lower or local levels of organization where the women had more influence were more important to daily life. In fact when there was no feud between the different nations the highest council might go a long time without meeting at all. However,

there's was not a "matriarchal" society: men were not exploited or devalued the way women are in patriarchal societies. Rather, each group had a measure of autonomy and means for preserving a balance. Despite centuries of colonization by a patriarchal culture, many groups of Haudenosaunne retain their traditional gender relations and still stand out in sharp contrast to the gender-oppressive culture of Canada and the United States.

Aren't people naturally warlike?

Political philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and psychologists like Sigmund Freud assumed that civilization and government have a moderating effect on what they saw as people's warlike and brutal instincts. Pop-culture representations of human origins, like the first scenes of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* or the illustrations in children's books of hyper-masculine cavemen battling mammoths and sabertooth tigers, provide a picture that can be as convincing as memory: early humans had to fight one another and even battle nature to survive. But if early human life had been as bloody and warlike as our mythology has depicted it, humans would simply have died out. Any species with a reproductive cycle of 15–20 years that usually only produce one offspring at a time simply cannot survive if their chance for dying in any given year is more than a couple percent. It would have been mathematically impossible for *Homo sapiens* to have survived that imaginary battle against nature and against one another.

Anarchists have long alleged that war is a product of the state. Some anthropological research has produced accounts of peaceful stateless societies, and of warfare among other stateless societies that was little more than a rough sport with few casualties^[9]. Naturally, the state has found its defenders, who have set out to prove that war is indeed inevitable and thus not the fault of specific oppressive social structures. In one monumental study, *War Before Civilization*, Lawrence Keeley showed that of an extensive sample of stateless societies, a large number had engaged in aggressive warfare, and a great majority had engaged at the very least in defensive warfare. Only a tiny minority had never encountered war, and a few fled their homelands to avoid war. Keeley was endeavoring to show that people are warlike, even though his results demonstrated that people could choose from a wide range of behaviors including being warlike, avoiding war but still defending against aggression, not knowing war at all, and disliking war so much they would flee their homeland rather than fight. Contrary to his title, Keeley was documenting war after civilization, not "before." A major part of his data on non-Western societies came from the explorers, missionaries, soldiers, traders, and anthropologists who rode the waves of colonization around the world, bringing land conflicts and ethnic rivalries to previously unimaginable scales through mass enslavement, genocide, invasion, evangelism, and the introduction of new weapons, diseases, and addictive substances. Needless to say, the civilizing influence of the colonizers generated warfare at the margins.

Keeley's study characterizes as warlike societies that had been peaceful for a hundred years but were chased off their land and, given the options of starving to death or invading their neighbors' territory for space to live, chose the latter. The fact that under these conditions of global colonialism, genocide, and enslavement any societies remained peaceful at all proves that if people really want to, they can be peaceful even in the worst of circumstances. Not to say that in such circumstances there is anything wrong with fighting back against aggression!

War may be the result of natural human behavior, but so is peace. Violence certainly existed before the state, but the state developed warfare and domination to unprecedented levels. As one of its great proponents pointed out, "war is the health of the state." It is no mistake that the institutions of power in our civilization — media, academia, government, religions — have exaggerated the prevalence of war and understated the possibility for peace. These institutions are invested in ongoing wars and occupations; they profit from them, and attempts to create a more peaceful society threaten their existence.

One such attempt is the Faslane Peace Camp, a land occupation outside Scotland's Faslane Naval Base, which houses Trident nuclear missiles. The Peace Camp is a popular expression of the desire for a peaceful society, organized on anarchist and socialist lines. Faslane Peace Camp has been continuously occupied since June 1982 and is now well established, with hot water and bathroom facilities, a communal kitchen and living room, and 12 caravans housing permanent residents and space for visitors. The Peace Camp serves as a base area for protests in which people block the roads, shut down the gates, and even penetrate the base itself to carry out sabotage. Galvanized by the Peace Camp, there is widespread popular opposition to the naval base, and some of Scotland's political parties have called for the base to be closed down. In September 1981, a group of Welsh women formed a similar camp, the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, outside an RAF base housing cruise missiles in Berkshire, England. The women were forcibly evicted in 1984 but immediately reoccupied the site, and in 1991 the last missiles were removed. The camp remained until 2000, when the women won permission to set up a commemorative memorial.

These peace camps bear some similarity to the Life and Labor Commune, the largest of the Tolstoyan communes. It was an agricultural commune established near Moscow in 1921 by people following the pacifist and anarchist teachings of Leo Tolstoy. Its members, nearly one thousand at their peak, were at odds with the Soviet government on account of refusing to perform military service. For this reason, the commune was finally shut down by the authorities in 1930; but during its existence, the participants created a large self-organized community in peace and resistance.

The Catholic Worker movement began in the United States in 1933 as a response to the Great Depression, but today many of the 185 Catholic Worker communities throughout North America and Europe focus on opposing the militarism of the government and creating the

foundations of a peaceful society. Inseparable from their opposition to war is their commitment to social justice, which manifests in the soup kitchens, shelters, and other service projects to help the poor that form a part of every Catholic Worker house. Although Christian, the Catholic Workers generally criticize church hierarchy and promote tolerance of other religions. They are also anti-capitalist, preaching voluntary poverty and “distributist communitarianism; self-sufficien[cy] through farming, crafting, and appropriate technology; a radically new society where people will rely on the fruits of their own toil and labor; associations of mutuality, and a sense of fairness to resolve conflicts.”^[10] Some Catholic Workers even call themselves Christian Anarchists. Catholic Worker communities, which function as communes or aid centers for the poor, often provide a base for protests and direct actions against the military. Catholic Workers have entered military bases to sabotage weaponry, though they waited for the police afterwards, intentionally going to jail as a further act of protest. Some of their communities also shelter victims of war, such as torture survivors fleeing the results of US imperialism in other countries.

How peaceful a society could we create if we overcame the belligerence of governments and fostered new norms in our culture? The Semai, agriculturalists in Malaya, offer one indication. Their murder rate is only 0.56/100,000 per year, compared with 0.86 in Norway, 6.26 in the US, and 20.20 in Russia.^[11] This may be related to their childrearing strategy: traditionally the Semai do not hit their children, and respect for their children’s autonomy is a normalized value in their society. One of the few occasions in which Semai adults will typically intervene is when children lose their tempers or fight one another, in which case nearby adults will snatch up the children and take them to their respective houses. The major forces that uphold Semai peacefulness seem to be an emphasis on learning self-control and the great importance accorded to public opinion in a cooperative society.

According to Robert Dentan, a Western anthropologist who lived with them, “little violence occurs within Semai society. Violence, in fact, seems to terrify the Semai. A Semai does not meet force with force, but with passivity or flight. Yet, he has no institutionalized way of preventing violence — no social controls, no police or courts. Somehow a Semai learns automatically always to keep tight rein over his aggressive impulses.”^[12] The first time the Semai participated in a war was when the British conscripted them to fight against the Communist insurgency in the early 1950s. Clearly, warfare is not an inevitability and certainly not a human need: rather, it is a consequence of political, social, and economic arrangements, and these arrangements are ours to shape.

Aren’t domination and authority natural?

Nowadays, it is harder to make ideological justifications for the state. A massive body of research demonstrates that many human societies have been staunchly egalitarian, and that even within capitalism many people continue to form egalitarian networks and communities. In order

to reconcile this with their view that evolution is a matter of fierce competition, some scientists have postulated a “human egalitarian syndrome,” theorizing that humans evolved to live in close-knit, homogenous groups, in which the passing on of members’ genes was not assured by the survival of the individual but by the survival of the group.

According to this theory, cooperation and egalitarianism prevailed within these groups because it was in everyone’s genetic self-interest that the group survived. Genetic competition occurred between different groups, and the groups that did the best job of taking care of their members were the ones to pass on their genes. Direct genetic competition between individuals was superseded by competition between different groups employing different social strategies, and humans evolved a whole host of social skills that allowed for greater cooperation. This would explain why, for most of human existence, we have lived in societies with little or no hierarchy, until certain technological developments allowed some societies to stratify and dominate their neighbors.

This is not to say that domination and authority were unnatural, and that technology was a forbidden fruit that corrupted an otherwise innocent humanity. In fact, some hunter-gatherer societies were so patriarchal they used gang rape as a form of punishment against women, and some societies with agriculture and metal tools have been fiercely egalitarian. Some of the peoples in North America’s Pacific Northwest were sedentary hunter-gatherers and they had a heavily stratified society with a slave class. And at the far end of the technological spectrum, nomadic hunter-gatherer groups in Australia were dominated by male elders. Older men could have multiple wives, younger men had none, and women were evidently doled out like social property.^[13]

Humans are capable of both authoritarian and anti-authoritarian behavior. Horizontal societies that were not intentionally anti-authoritarian could easily have developed coercive hierarchies when new technologies made that possible, and even without a lot of technology they could make life hell for groups considered inferior. It seems that the most common forms of inequality among otherwise egalitarian societies were gender and age discrimination, which could accustom a society to inequality and create the prototype for a power structure — rule by male elders. This structure could become more powerful over time with the development of metal tools and weapons, surpluses, cities, and the like.

The point, though, is that these forms of inequality were not inevitable. Societies that frowned on authoritarian behaviors consciously avoided the rise of hierarchy. In fact, many societies have given up centralized organization or technologies that allow for domination. This shows that history is not a one-way track. For example, the Moroccan Imazighen, or Berbers, did not form centralized political systems over the past several centuries, even while other societies around them did. “Establishing a dynasty is next to impossible,” wrote one commentator, “due to the

fact that the chief is faced with constant revolt which ultimately becomes successful and returns the system to the old decentralized anarchic order.”^[14]

What is the factor that allows societies to avoid domination and coercive authority? A study by Christopher Boehm, surveying dozens of egalitarian societies on all continents, including peoples who lived as foragers, horticulturalists, agriculturalists, and pastoralists, found that the common factor is a conscious desire to remain egalitarian: an anti-authoritarian culture. “The primary and most immediate cause of egalitarian behavior is a moralistic determination on the part of a local group’s main political actors that no one of its members should be allowed to dominate the others.”^[15] Rather than culture being determined by material conditions, it seems that culture shapes the social structures that reproduce a people’s material conditions.

In certain situations some form of leadership is inevitable, as some people have more skills or a more charismatic personality. Consciously egalitarian societies respond to these situations by not institutionalizing the position of leader, by not affording a leader any special privileges, or by fostering a culture that makes it shameful for that person to flaunt his or her leadership or try to gain power over others. Furthermore, leadership positions change from one situation to another, depending on the skills needed for the task at hand. The leaders during a hunt are different from the leaders during house-building or ceremonies. If a person in a leadership role tries to gain more power or dominate his or her peers, the rest of the group employs “intentional leveling mechanisms”: behaviors intended to bring the leader back down to earth. For example, among many anti-authoritarian hunter-gatherer societies, the most skillful hunter in a band faces criticism and ridicule if he is seen to brag and use his talents to boost his ego rather than for the benefit of the whole group.

If these social pressures do not work, the sanctions escalate, and in many egalitarian societies in the final instance they will kick out or kill a leader who is incurably authoritarian, long before that leader is able to assume coercive powers. These “reverse dominance hierarchies,” in which the leaders must obey popular will because they are powerless to maintain their positions of leadership without support, have appeared in many different societies and functioned over long periods of time. Some of the egalitarian societies documented in Boehm’s survey have a chief or a shaman who plays a ritual role or acts as an impartial mediator in disputes; others appoint a leader in times of trouble, or have a peace chief and a war chief. But these positions of leadership are not coercive, and over hundreds of years have not developed into authoritarian roles. Often the people who fill these roles see them as a temporary social responsibility, which they wish to hand off swiftly because of the higher level of criticism and responsibility they face while occupying them.

European civilization has historically demonstrated a much higher tolerance for authoritarianism than the egalitarian societies described in the survey. Yet as the political and economic systems that would become the modern state and capitalism were developing in

Europe, there were a number of rebellions that demonstrate that even here authority was an imposition. One of the greatest of these rebellions was the Peasants War. In 1524 and 1525, as many as 300,000 peasant insurgents, joined by townsfolk and some lesser nobility, rose up against the property owners and church hierarchy in a war that left about 100,000 people dead throughout Bavaria, Saxony, Thüringen, Schwaben, Alsace, as well as parts of what are now Switzerland and Austria. The princes and clergy of the Holy Roman Empire had been steadily increasing taxes to pay for rising administrative and military costs, as government became more top-heavy. The artisans and workers of the towns were affected by these taxes, but the peasants received the heaviest burden. To increase their power and their revenue, princes forced free peasants into serfdom, and resurrected Roman Civil law, which instituted private ownership of land, something of a step backwards from the feudal system in which the land was a trust between peasant and lord that involved rights and obligations.

Meanwhile, elements of the old feudal hierarchy, such as the knighthood and the clergy, were becoming obsolete, and conflicted with other elements of the ruling class. The new burgher mercantile class, as well as many progressive princes, opposed the privileges of the clergy and the conservative structure of the Catholic church. A new, less centralized structure that could base power in councils in the towns and cities, such as the system proposed by Martin Luther, would allow the new political class to ascend.

In the years immediately prior to the War, a number of Anabaptist prophets began travelling around the region espousing revolutionary ideas against political authority, church doctrine, and even against the reforms of Martin Luther. These people included Thomas Dreschel, Nicolas Storch, Mark Thomas Stübner, and most famously, Thomas Müntzer. Some of them argued for total religious freedom, the end of non-voluntary baptism, and the abolition of government on earth. Needless to say they were persecuted by Catholic authorities and by supporters of Luther and banned from many cities, but they continued to travel around Bohemia, Bavaria, and Switzerland, winning supporters and stoking peasant rebelliousness.

In 1524, peasants and urban workers met in the Schwarzwald region of Germany and drafted the 12 Articles of the Black Forest, and the movement they created quickly spread. The articles, with Biblical references used as justification, called for the abolition of serfdom and the freedom of all people; the municipal power for people to elect and remove preachers; the abolition of taxes on cattle and inheritance; a prohibition on the privilege of the nobility to arbitrarily raise taxes; free access to water, hunting, fishing, and the forests; and the restoration of communal lands expropriated by the nobility. Another text printed and circulated in massive quantity by the insurgents was the *Bundesordnung*, the federal order, which expounded a model social order based on federated municipalities. Less literate elements of the movement were even more radical, as judged by their actions and the folklore they left behind; their goal was to wipe the nobility off the face of the earth and institute a mysticist utopia then and there.

Social tension increased throughout the year, as authorities tried to prevent outright rebellion by suppressing rural gatherings such as popular festivals and weddings. In August 1524, the situation finally erupted at Stühlingen in the Black Forest region. A countess demanded that the peasants render her a special harvest on a church holiday. Instead the peasants refused to pay all taxes and formed an army of 1200 people, under the leadership of a former mercenary, Hans Müller. They marched to the town of Waldshut and were joined by the townspeople, and then marched on the castle at Stühlingen and besieged it. Realizing they needed some kind of military structure, they decided to elect their own captains, sergeants, and corporals. In September they defended themselves from a Hapsburg army in an indecisive battle, and subsequently refused to lay down their arms and beg pardon when entreated to do so. That autumn peasant strikes, refusals to pay tithes, and rebellions broke out throughout the region, as peasants extended their politics from individual complaints to a unified rejection of the feudal system as a whole.

With the spring thaw of 1525, fighting resumed with a ferocity. The peasant armies seized cities and executed large numbers of clergy and nobility. But in February the Schwabian League, an alliance of nobility and clergy in the region, achieved a victory in Italy, where they had been fighting on behalf of Charles V, and were able to bring their troops home and devote them to crushing the peasants. Meanwhile Martin Luther, the burghers, and the progressive princes withdrew all their support and called for the annihilation of the revolutionary peasants; they wanted to reform the system, not to destroy it, and the uprising had already sufficiently destabilized the power structure. Finally on May 15, 1525, the main peasant army was decisively defeated at Frankenhausen; Müntzer and other influential leaders were seized and executed, and the rebellion was put down. However, over the following years the Anabaptist movement spread throughout Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, and peasant revolts continued to break out, in the hopes that one day the church and the state would be destroyed for good.

Capitalism and modern democratic states succeeded in establishing themselves over the following centuries, but they have been forever haunted by the specter of rebellion from below. Within statist societies, the ability to organize without hierarchies still exists today, and the possibility remains to create anti-authoritarian cultures that can bring any would-be leaders back down to earth. Appropriately, much of the resistance against global authority is organized horizontally. The worldwide anti-globalization movement arose largely from the resistance of the Zapatistas in Mexico, autonomists and anarchists in Europe, farmers and workers in Korea, and popular rebellions against financial institutions like the IMF, occurring across the world from South Africa to India. The Zapatistas and autonomists especially are marked by their anti-authoritarian cultures, a marked break from the hierarchy of Marxist-Leninists who had dominated international struggles in previous generations.

The anti-globalization movement proved itself to be a global force in June, 1999, when hundreds of thousands of people in cities from London, England to Port Harcourt, Nigeria took the streets for the J18 Carnival Against Capitalism; in November later that year, participants in the same movement shocked the world by shutting down the summit of the World Trade Organization in Seattle.

The most remarkable thing about this global resistance is that it was created horizontally, by diverse organizations and affinity groups pioneering new forms of consensus. This movement had no leaders and fomented constant opposition to all forms of authority that developed within its ranks. Those who attempted to put themselves permanently in the role of chief or spokesperson were ostracized — or even treated to a pie in the face, as high profile organizer Medea Benjamin was at the US Social Forum in 2007.

Lacking leadership, short on formal organization, and constantly critiquing internal power dynamics and studying more egalitarian ways of organizing, anti-globalization activists went on to achieve further tactical victories. In Prague in September 2000, 15,000 protestors overcame the massive police presence and broke up the last day of the summit of the International Monetary Fund. In Quebec City in April, 2001, protestors breached the security fence around a summit planning the Free Trade Area of the Americas; police responded by filling the city with so much teargas that it even entered the building where the talks were taking place. Consequently many city residents came to favor the protestors. Police had to step up repression to contain the growing anti-globalization movement; they arrested 600 protestors and injured three with gunfire at the European Union summit in Sweden in 2001, and a month later they murdered anarchist Carlo Giuliani at the G8 summit in Genoa, where 150,000 people had gathered to protest the conference of the eight most powerful world governments.

The Dissent! Network arose out of the European anti-globalization movement to organize major protests against the G8 summit in Scotland in 2005. The Network also organized major protest camps and blockade actions against the G8 summit in Germany in 2007, and helped with the mobilizations against the G8 summit in Japan in 2008. Without a central leadership or hierarchy, the network facilitated communication between groups located in different cities and countries, and organized major meetings to discuss and decide on strategies for upcoming actions against the G8. The strategies were intended to enable diverse approaches, so many affinity groups could organize mutually supportive actions within a common framework rather than carrying out the orders of a central organization. For example, a blockade plan might designate one road leading to the summit site as a zone for people who prefer peaceful or theatrical tactics, while another entrance might be designated for people who wish to construct barricades and are willing to defend themselves against the police. These strategy meetings drew people from a dozen countries and included translations in multiple languages. Afterwards, fliers, announcements, position papers, and critiques were translated and uploaded

to a website. The anarchist forms of coordination used by the protestors repeatedly proved effective at countering and sometimes even outmaneuvering the police and corporate media, which enjoyed teams of thousands of paid professionals, advanced communications and surveillance infrastructure, and resources far beyond what was available to the movement.

The anti-globalization movement can be contrasted with the anti-war movement that arose in response to the so-called War on Terror. After September 11, 2001, world leaders sought to undercut the growing anti-capitalist movement by identifying terrorism as enemy number one, thus reframing the narrative of global conflict. Following the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the end of the Cold War, they needed a new war and a new opposition. People had to view their options as a choice between hierarchical powers — statist democracy or fundamentalist terrorists — rather than between domination and freedom. In the conservative environment that followed September 11, the anti-war movement quickly came to be dominated by reformist and hierarchically-organized groups. Although the movement kicked off with the most widely attended day of protest in human history on February 15, 2003, the organizers deliberately channeled the energy of the participants into rigidly controlled rituals that did not challenge the war machine. Within two years, the anti-war movement had completely squandered the momentum built up during the anti-globalization era.

The anti-war movement could not stop the occupation of Iraq, or even sustain itself, because people are neither empowered nor fulfilled by passively participating in symbolic spectacles. In contrast, the effectiveness of decentralized networks can be seen in the many victories of the anti-globalization movement: the summits shut down, the collapse of the WTO and FTAA, the dramatic scaling back of the IMF and World Bank.^[16] This non-hierarchical movement demonstrated that people desire to free themselves from domination, and that they have the ability to cooperate in an anti-authoritarian manner even in large groups of strangers from different nations and cultures.

So from scientific studies of human history to protesters making history today, the evidence overwhelmingly contradicts the statist account of human nature. Rather than coming from a brutally authoritarian ancestry and later subsuming these instincts into a competitive system based on obedience to authority, humankind has not had one single trajectory. Our beginnings seem to have been characterized by a range between strict egalitarianism and small-scale hierarchy with a relatively equal distribution of wealth. When coercive hierarchies did appear, they did not spread everywhere immediately, and often provoked significant resistance. Even where societies are ruled by authoritarian structures, resistance is every much a part of the social reality as domination and obedience. Furthermore, the state and authoritarian civilization are not the last stops on the line. Even though a global revolution has yet to succeed, we have many examples of post-state societies, in which we can make out hints of a stateless future.

Half a century ago, anthropologist Pierre Clastres concluded that the stateless and anti-authoritarian societies he studied in South America were not holdouts from a primordial era, as other Westerners had assumed. He argued that, on the contrary, they were well aware of the possible emergence of the state, and they were organizing themselves to prevent this. It turns out that many of them were in fact post-state societies founded by refugees and rebels who had fled from or overthrown earlier states. Similarly, anarchist Peter Lamborn Wilson hypothesized that anti-authoritarian societies in eastern North America formed in resistance to the hierarchical Hopewell mound-building societies, and recent research seems to be confirming this. What others had interpreted as ahistorical ethnicities were the end results of political movements.

The Cossacks who inhabited the Russian frontiers provide another example of this phenomenon. Their societies were founded by people fleeing serfdom and other inconveniences of government oppression. They learned horsemanship and developed impressive martial skills to survive in the frontier environment and defend themselves against neighboring states. Eventually, they came to be viewed as a distinct ethnicity with a privileged autonomy, and the tsar whom their ancestors renounced sought them out as military allies.

According to Yale political scientist James C. Scott, everything about such societies — from the crops they grow to their kinship systems — can be read as anti-authoritarian social strategies. Scott documents the Hill People of Southeast Asia, an agglomeration of societies existing in rugged terrain where fragile state structures face a severe disadvantage. For hundreds of years, these people have resisted state domination, including frequent wars of conquest or extermination by the Chinese empire and periods of continuous attacks by slavers. Cultural and linguistic diversity is exponentially greater in the hills than in the state-controlled rice paddies of the valleys, where a monoculture holds sway. Hill People frequently speak multiple languages and belong to multiple ethnicities. Their social organization is suited for quick and easy dispersal and reunification, allowing them to escape assaults and wage guerrilla warfare. Their kinship systems are based on overlapping and redundant relationships that create a strong social network and limit the formalization of power. Their oral cultures are more decentralized and flexible than nearby literate cultures, in which reliance on the written word encourages orthodoxy and gives extra power to those with the resources to keep records.

The Hill People have an interesting relationship with the surrounding states. The people of the valleys view them as “living ancestors,” even though they have formed as a response to the valley civilizations. They are post-state, not pre-state, but the ideology of the state refuses to recognize such a category as “post-state” because the state supposes itself to be the pinnacle of progress. Subjects of the valley civilizations frequently “headed for the hills” to live more freely; however the narratives and mythologies of the Chinese, Vietnamese, Burmese, and other authoritarian civilizations in the centuries leading up to World War II seemed to be designed to prevent their

members from “going back” to those they perceived as barbarians. According to some scholars, the Great Wall of China was built as much to keep the Chinese in as the barbarians out; yet in the valley civilizations of China and Southeast Asia, myths, language, and rituals that might explain such cultural defections were suspiciously lacking. Culture was used as another Great Wall to hold these fragile civilizations together. No wonder the “barbarians” gave up written language in favor of a more decentralized oral culture: without written records and a specialized class of scribes, history became common property, rather than a tool for indoctrination.

Far from being a necessary social advancement that people readily accept, the state is an imposition that many people try to flee. A proverb from the Burmese encapsulates this: “It is easy for a subject to find a lord, but hard for a lord to find a subject.” In Southeast Asia, until recently, the primary goal of warfare was not to capture territory but to capture subjects, as people frequently ran for the hills to create egalitarian societies.^[17] It is ironic that so many of us are convinced we have an essential need for the state, when in fact it is the state that needs us.

A broader sense of self

A hundred years ago, Peter Kropotkin, the Russian geographer and anarchist theorist, published his revolutionary book, Mutual Aid, which argues that the tendency of people to help one another reciprocally, in a spirit of solidarity, was a greater factor in human evolution than competition. We can see cooperative behaviors similarly playing a role in the survival of many species of mammals, birds, fish, and insects. Still, the belief persists that humans are naturally selfish, competitive, warlike, and male-dominated. This belief is founded upon a misrepresentation of so-called primitive peoples as brutal, and of the state as a necessary, pacifying force.

Westerners who see themselves as the pinnacle of human evolution typically view hunter-gatherers and other stateless peoples as relics of the past, even if they are alive in the present. In doing so, they are presuming that history is an inevitable progression from less to more complex, and that Western civilization is more complex than other cultures. If history is organized into the Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Industrial Age, Information Age, and so on, someone who does not use metal tools must still be living in the Stone Age, right? But it is eurocentric, to say the least, to assume that a hunter-gatherer who knows the uses of a thousand different plants is less sophisticated than an operator at a nuclear power plant who knows how to push a thousand different buttons but doesn’t know where his food comes from.

Capitalism may be capable of feats of production and distribution that have never been possible before, but at the same time this society is tragically unable to keep everyone fed and healthy, and has never existed without gross inequalities, oppression, and environmental devastation. One might argue that members of our society are socially stunted, if not outright primitive, when it comes to being able to cooperate and organize ourselves without authoritarian control.

A nuanced view of stateless societies shows them to have their own developed forms of social organization and their own complex histories, both of which contradict Western notions about “natural” human characteristics. The great diversity of human behaviors that are considered normal in different societies calls into question the very idea of human nature.

Our understanding of human nature directly influences what we expect of people. If humans are naturally selfish and competitive, we cannot expect to live in a cooperative society. When we see how differently other cultures have characterized human nature, we can recognize human nature as a cultural value, an idealized and normative mythology that justifies the way a society is organized. Western civilization devotes an immense amount of resources to social control, policing, and cultural production reinforcing capitalist values. The Western idea of human nature functions as a part of this social control, discouraging rebellion against authority. We are taught from childhood that without authority human life would descend into chaos.

This view of human nature was advanced by Hobbes and other European philosophers to explain the origins and purpose of the State; this marked a shift to scientific arguments at a time when divine arguments no longer sufficed. Hobbes and his contemporaries lacked the psychological, historical, archaeological, and ethnographic data that we have today, and their thinking was still heavily influenced by a legacy of Christian teachings. Even now that we have access to an abundance of information contradicting Christian cosmology and statist political science, the popular conception of human nature has not changed dramatically. Why are we still so miseducated? A second question answers the first: who controls education in our society? Nonetheless, anyone who counters the authoritarian dogma faces an uphill battle against the charge of “romanticism.”

But if human nature is not fixed, if it can encompass a wide range of possibilities, couldn’t we use a romantic dose of imagination in envisioning new possibilities? The acts of rebellion occurring within our society right now, from the Faslane Peace Camp to the Really Really Free Markets, contain the seeds of a peaceful and openhanded society. Popular responses to natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans show that everyone has the potential to cooperate when the dominant social order is disrupted. These examples point the way to a broader sense of self — an understanding of human beings as creatures capable of a wide range of behaviors.

One might say selfishness is natural, in that people inevitably live according to their own desires and experiences. But egoism need not be competitive or dismissive of others. Our relationships extend far beyond our bodies and our minds — we live in communities, depend on ecosystems for food and water, and need friends, families, and lovers for our emotional health. Without institutionalized competition and exploitation, a person’s self-interest overlaps with the interests of her community and her environment. Seeing our relationships with our friends and nature as fundamental parts of ourselves expands our sense of connection with the world and our

responsibility for it. It is not in our self-interest to be dominated by authorities, or to dominate others; in developing a broader sense of self, we can structure our lives and communities accordingly.

End Notes

- [2] "The Really Really Free Market: Instituting the Gift Economy," *Rolling Thunder*, No. 4 Spring 2007, p. 34.
- [3] Robert K. Dentan, *The Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979, p. 48.
- [4] Christopher Boehm, "Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 34, No. 3, June 1993.
- [5] Amy Goodman, "Louisiana Official: Federal Gov't Abandoned New Orleans," *Democracy Now*, September 7, 2005. Fox News, CNN, and The New York Times all falsely reported murders and roving gangs of rapists in the Superdome, where refugees gathered during the storm. (Aaron Kinney, "Hurricane Horror Stories," *Salon.com*)
- [6] Jesse Walker ("Nightmare in New Orleans: Do disasters destroy social cooperation?" *Reason Online*, September 7, 2005) cites the studies of sociologist E.L. Quarantelli, who has found that "After the cataclysm, social bonds will strengthen, volunteerism will explode, violence will be rare..."
- [7] Roger M. Keesing, Andrew J. Strathern, *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*, 3rd Edition, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998, p.83.
- [8] Judith Van Allen "Sitting On a Man": Colonialism and the Lost Political Institutions of Igbo Women." *Canadian Journal of African Studies*. Vol. ii, 1972, pp. 211–219.
- [9] Johan M.G. van der Dennen, "Ritualized 'Primitive' Warfare and Rituals in War: Phenocopy, Homology, or...?" rechten.eldoc.ub.rug.nl Among other examples, van der Dennen cites the New Guinea highlanders, among whom warring bands would face off, yell insults, and shoot arrows that did not have feathers, and thus could not be aimed, while another band on the sidelines would yell that it was wrong for brothers to fight, and attempt to calm the situation before blood was shed. The original source for this account is Rappaport, R.A. (1968), *Pigs for the Ancestors: Ritual in the Ecology of a New Guinea People*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- [10] "The Aims and Means of the Catholic Worker," *The Catholic Worker*, May 2008.
- [11] Graham Kemp and Douglas P. Fry (eds.), *Keeping the Peace: Conflict Resolution and Peaceful Societies around the World*, New York: Routledge, 2004. Semai murder rate, p. 191, other murder rates p. 149. The low Norwegian murder rate shows that industrial societies can also be peaceful. It should be noted that Norway has one of the lowest wealth gaps of any capitalist country, and also a low reliance on police and prisons. The majority of civil disputes and many criminal cases in Norway are settled through mediation (p. 163).
- [12] Robert K. Dentan, *The Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979, p. 59.
- [13] Dmitri M. Bondarenko and Andrey V. Korotayev, *Civilizational Models of Politogenesis*, Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2000.
- [14] Harold Barclay, *People Without Government: An Anthropology of Anarchy*, London: Kahn and Averill, 1982, p. 98.
- [15] Christopher Boehm, "Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy," *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 34, No. 3, June 1993.

^[16] The victories of the movement and the failure of the IMF and World Bank are argued by David Graeber in “The Shock of Victory,” *Rolling Thunder* no. 5, Spring 2008.

^[17] The paragraphs regarding the Hill People and Southeast Asia are based on James C. Scott, “Civilizations Can’t Climb Hills: A Political History of Statelessness in Southeast Asia,” lecture at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, February 2, 2005.

Recommended Reading

Robert K. Dentan, *The Semai: A Nonviolent People of Malaya*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.

Christopher Boehm, "Egalitarian Behavior and Reverse Dominance Hierarchy," *Current Anthropology*, Vol.34, No.3, June 1993.

Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State*, (1974), New York: Zone Books, 1987.

Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004.

Colin M. Turnbull, *The Forest People*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961.

James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Bob Black, "The Abolition of Work," 1985. *

Other Works By Peter Gelderloos

2017, *Worshipping Power: An Anarchist View of Early State Formation*. Oakland: AK Press

2014, *Learning From Ferguson*. Seattle: Left Bank Books

2013, *The Failure of Nonviolence: From the Arab Spring to Occupy*. Seattle: Left Bank Books

2010, *Anarchy Works*. San Francisco: Ardent Press

2010, *To Get to the Other Side: a journey through Europe and its anarchist movements*

2009, *Sousa in the Echo Chamber*. Homebound Books

2007, *How Nonviolence Protects the State*. Boston: South End Press.

2006, *Consensus: A New Handbook for Grassroots Social, Political, and Environmental Groups*. Tucson: See Sharp Press

2005, *How Nonviolence Protects the State* [first edition]. Harrisonburg: Signalfire Press

2004, *What is Democracy?*. Tucson: See Sharp Press



**Compiled and distributed by
Milwaukee Literature Supply**

mkelitsupply.com

instagram: @MKElitsupply

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright

